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HERMENEUTICS, TRANSITIONS, AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN CLASSIC TO POSTCLASSIC MAYA SOCIETY

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 Popular views of the Classic Maya collapse and of the changes between the Classic and Postclassic Maya are due as much to past paradigmatic factors, including research perspective and methodology, as they are to actual data or distinctions. The Classic and Postclassic Maya have often been viewed in terms of polar oppositions. The break between the two eras frequently has been described as temporally and culturally abrupt. However, the Maya survived the collapse at many sites in the southern lowlands. And, cultural distinctions once drawn between the two eras are not as clear-cut as once thought. Changes once believed to coincide with the inception of the Maya Postclassic period actually took place much earlier during the Classic period. These new interpretations may be used to critically re-examine the transitions and transformations that occurred between the Maya Classic and Postclassic eras and to reconsider the Classic Maya collapse.

A recurrent theme for discussion among scholars and the lay public alike is the inevitability of the rise and fall of civilizations (e.g., Tainter 1988; Yoffee and Cowgill 1988). Whether the interest in the rise and fall of past cultures is ascribed to an inherent fear of collapse and decay in contemporary culture or to an insatiable curiosity about the past, in many of these considerations the “mysterious” collapse of the southern lowland Maya of Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize is considered to be a case in point. Occurring during the eighth and ninth centuries A.D., the Classic Maya collapse is defined primarily by the end of erection of stone monuments with royal hieroglyphic inscriptions and the presumed coeval aban-

donment of many major architectural centers. Explanations for its occurrence range from internal factors involving peasant revolt to external intervention by foreign invaders to environmental factors, particularly related to drought and the overuse of land. Popular conceptions of the Maya who survived the collapse are of a lessened or almost nonexistent civilization (Gallencamp 1985).

Continued research on the Maya suggests many factors that obscure a simple rise-and-fall scenario and place Maya collapse discussions squarely within current debates in archaeological theory—particularly concerning the way the past is constructed in the present. It is now evident that the Classic Maya “collapse” was neither total nor uniform throughout the Maya area and that the collapse and the transition between the Classic and Postclassic periods was in many places a very lengthy and even a continuous process. A further unexpected development is the discovery that a number of features previously thought to characterize the Postclassic Maya actually had their origins substantially earlier in the Classic period.

HERMENEUTICS: PERCEPTIONS OF THE POST-COLLAPSE MAYA

Inherent to discussions of the Classic Maya collapse are considerations of what came before it and what happened after it—or, in other words, the relationships between the Maya of the Classic (A.D. 250–900) and Postclassic (post-A.D. 900) periods. As scholars researching the Postclassic period have long noted (Chase and Rice 1985; Pendergast 1990b: 169), the Postclassic Maya often have been viewed with a Classic-period ethnocentrism. Descriptions and interpretations of the late Maya are frequently based on contrasts with the Classic period, usually consisting of lists of items missing from the Postclassic cultural repertoire that are thought to be prominent characteristics of the preceding Classic era. Thus, the Postclassic period has been characterized by a *lack* of finely carved monuments, a *lack* of tall impressive pyramids, a *lack* of slipped polychrome pottery, a *lack* of sumptuous tombs, and a *lack* of extremely large and densely populated centers.¹ All of this tended to make the Postclassic “less” than the Classic. And, as the modern Maya have also been portrayed as being but a shadow of their former glory (Morley and Brainerd 1956; Thompson 1954), these differences in material culture have been utilized to confirm the existence of a dichotomous picture between the Classic and Postclassic Maya.

Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation and meaning, has been incorporated into contemporary archaeology (Whitley 1998: 13). In discussing archaeological interpretation, Shanks and Tilley (1987: 107–108; see also Shanks and Hodder 1998: 76) have argued that a fourfold hermeneutic exists in archaeology (see also Binford 1989: 28). Interpretive problems exist in: (1) “understanding the relation between past and present;” (2) “understanding other societies and cultures;” (3) “understanding contemporary society, the site of archaeological interpretations;” and (4) “understanding the communities of archaeologists who are performing interpretations.” This fourfold hermeneutic is sometimes condensed

into a “double hermeneutic” (Preucel and Hodder 1996: 13) and other times is referred to as a “hermeneutic spiral” (Shanks and Hodder 1998: 82). Regardless of the specific terminology, hermeneutic analysis is concerned with both searching for patterns in past contexts and considering the impact of research prejudice and prejudgments in the quest for meaning.

Knowledge of the Maya collapse and, by extension, interpretations of the Maya Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods has been conditioned by the social context in which it has been constructed, and compounded by attempts to view the Postclassic Maya from a Classic-period Maya perspective. For the most part, perceptions of the Postclassic Maya were set prior to substantial excavation of late Maya sites. Long-term work at Classic-period sites, such as Copán and Palenque, began prior to the onset of the twentieth century. In contrast, large-scale, long-term excavations of Postclassic sites were unheard of until the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s work at Mayapan in the 1950s (Pollock et al. 1962) and were not common until the last twenty-five years (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988; Pendergast 1981a; P. Rice and D. Rice 1985). Without a solid body of excavation data, interpretations of the late Maya were largely limited to the above-mentioned contrasts with the Classic period and to applications of statements found in historical writings. For example, certain commonly quoted ethnohistoric statements, such as those suggesting that the Maya maintained numerous “idols” (e.g., Tozzer 1941: 11), have led to views of late Maya religion as being nonunified. However, many of these descriptions may themselves have been conditioned not only by the sixteenth-century European—as opposed to Maya—mind-frame of the writers, but also by the way in which the information was gathered from local Maya; it has been suggested that in some cases Maya respondents were tortured as a means of generating “complete” responses (Tedlock 1993). The research preferences of individual scholars also may have played a role in negative characterizations of the Postclassic Maya; this seems implicit in Shook’s (1990: 252) retrospective lamentation that the final Carnegie Project could not work on “early material and big sites,” but was instead relegated “to rock piles in Mayapan!” One must also consider the frame of reference or meaning for the ancient and modern Maya, the social settings of both contemporary and earlier archaeologists, as well as the ethnographic skills of sixteenth-century European writers (who evince many of the same problems with ethnographic interpretation that have been identified for modern ethnographers [Tedlock 1991]). Thus, there is clearly a double (Preucel and Hodder 1996: 13) and/or quadruple hermeneutic (Shanks and Hodder 1998: 76) involved in archaeological interpretation of the ancient Maya of the Postclassic era.

In spite of continued scholarly work and new interpretations concerning the Postclassic Maya (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988; A. Chase and P. Rice 1985; Sabloff and Andrews 1986b), *popular* interpretations of Postclassic Maya society often continue to reflect models from earlier writings (Coe 1993; Gallenkamp 1985), following the early Greco-Roman comparison used by Proskouriakoff

(1955) in which the term "Postclassic" was applied in a developmental sense indicating the fall from a "Classic" age. But, how could this still be the case? Answering this question requires a review of literature on the collapse itself.

THE CLASSIC MAYA COLLAPSE

The "Classic Maya collapse," correlated by many with the Terminal Classic period, was once thought to be a very rapid event occurring throughout the southern Maya lowlands from roughly A.D. 830 to 889 (Culbert 1988: 74; Morley 1946; Sharer 1993; Thompson 1954, 1970). The perception of a rapid and sudden collapse was closely tied to epigraphic interpretation in which dates for the collapse were derived from a cessation of Maya hieroglyphic history on stone stelae and altars (Lowe 1985). Within this interpretive context, the collapse also became correlated with the widespread cessation of monumental architectural construction, a decline in the use of elaborate tombs, and large-scale site abandonment (Culbert 1988). Frequently associated with this view of the Maya collapse is a conjoined idea of cultural decay or decline that occurred in conjunction with drastic change (Adams 1991; Thompson 1954).

Explanations for the collapse are numerous (Adams 1973b; Culbert 1988; Sharer 1977; Willey and Shimkin 1973) and varied. Single and combined explanations include demographic and ecological stresses, natural disasters, internal social change and/or upheaval, foreign intrusion, and warfare. But this great diversity of explanations has often been subsumed within a paradigm of a relatively rapid and catastrophic end to Classic Maya society. Becker (1979) once related Thompson's popular interpretations of the Maya collapse (which still form the dominant paradigm in Maya studies) to a romanticized Western view of the Russian Revolution (cf. Marcus 1982). Other modern events have been used to recast and interpret the Maya collapse. When Guatemala endured a massive earthquake in 1976, such natural disasters were resurrected as triggers for a sudden collapse (Bevan and Sharer 1983; see also Mackie 1961). More recently, analysis of Yucatán lake sediments has been used to return to a consideration of drought as a potential trigger for the Maya collapse (Sabloff 1995).

Although catastrophic events may have played a part in the "Classic Maya collapse," scholars researching the Maya have shown that the "collapse" was neither simultaneous nor uniform (Chase and Rice 1985; Marcus 1995). Hieroglyphic texts carved in stone ceased to be erected at various times at southern lowland sites (A.D. 761 at Dos Pilas [Houston 1993; Demarest 1993], A.D. 859 at Caracol [Houston 1987c], A.D. 869 at Tikal [Jones and Satterthwaite 1982], A.D. 889 at Seibal and Xultún [Sharer 1993], and A.D. 909 at Toniná [Sharer 1993]). The loss of texts was not sudden; it instead covered a span of 148 years. At many sites, furthermore, populations continued well beyond the last dated monuments, often for several hundred years, such as at Copán (Webster and Freter 1990b) and Caracol (D. and A. Chase 1996). Thus, the once cataclysmic "Maya collapse"

actually spanned several centuries. And, while stone monument erection with attendant Long Count dates was no longer common in the Maya lowlands, some lowland Maya continued to use the Long Count system on Classic-period monuments dating to the ninth and tenth centuries (Tedlock 1992).²

It is perhaps even more important to note that not all parts of Maya culture were transformed in unison, or even in conjunction, with the “collapse” and/or the cessation of monument erection. Some aspects of Maya culture changed well before and some well after A.D. 900. Perhaps most significant, many of the changes once believed to correlate exclusively with the onset of the Postclassic period (specifically many of those cited by Thompson [1954, 1970] that form the heart of the popular paradigm) can now be seen to have had their origins substantially earlier in the Classic period. This is true not only for some of the more mundane aspects of Maya material culture, such as construction techniques, but also for more aesthetic Maya ceremonialism, evident in ritual caching practices. A re-evaluation of the continuities and disjunctions between the Maya Classic and Postclassic periods is key, then, to understanding and reconstituting an interpretive frame for the Classic Maya collapse and the continuation and evolution of Maya culture.

VIEWS OF CHANGE IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Archaeological interpretations of culture change are of necessity based in considerations of change in material culture, combined with written materials when these are available. Although few archaeologists or anthropologists would argue that the initial appearance of a single artifact—in and of itself—indicates change in an entire culture, cumulative or conjoined changes are often thought to coincide with cultural transformations. But, there are no hard or fast rules to guide the precise correlation of material change with social or cultural behaviors. Thus, a consideration of hermeneutics is also key in considerations of culture change. This is particularly true for Maya Terminal Classic material remains, as these are easily viewed comparatively from both earlier and later perspectives. Differences of opinion on the inevitability of collapse also may be based in semantics as easily as in historic or archaeological data, especially because the term “cultural collapse” enjoys a variety of meanings ranging from the total death of a civilization to institutional restructuring (e.g., Erasmus 1963; Yoffee 1988: 15). However, just as the complete death of a civilization is a rarity in the archaeological record, so too is total disjunction between one time period and the next. More usually, distinct artifact types and classes are seen as varying and changing at different times and rates. In cases where near total disjunctions in material culture are initially posited, later work may reveal greater continuities than previously thought.

TIME AND SPACE SYSTEMATICS AND THE ROLE OF NORTHERN BELIZE

Part of our constructed archaeological reality with regard to the Terminal Classic period is the result of a series of early culture-historical perceptions and interpre-

tations. Most importantly, Chichen Itza in the northern lowlands (though now known to date to the Terminal Classic) was initially thought to postdate the Classic-period occupation in the southern Maya lowlands. Although some early researchers commented on this distinctive temporal placement (Pollock 1965), Chichen Itza was viewed as an Early Postclassic site (Tozzer 1957). Thus, initial views of the Terminal Classic in the Maya lowlands largely derived either from discoveries of the latest remains at Classic-period sites in central Petén or from attempts to move backward in time from the Postclassic northern lowlands using the direct historical approach. Almost by default, the Terminal Classic period became an analytical construct focused on specific artifacts and material traits rather than on any complete archaeological assemblage that could be either processually or contextually situated.

The Terminal Classic period has proved difficult to identify until relatively recently. Southern lowland Postclassic material remains were not successfully isolated from Classic remains until the late 1960s and early 1970s (Adams and Trik 1961; Bullard 1970, 1973; Sharer and Chase 1976) in spite of work at Tayasal by Guthe in the 1920s (A. Chase 1990; A. Chase and D. Chase 1985). By this time, an established paradigm of “collapse” had already been set in place (Morley and Brainerd 1956; Thompson 1954). In the northern lowlands there was an early focus on the Postclassic (Berlin 1953; Sanders 1960; Pollock et al. 1962), but the temporal frame of reference was dominated by iconographic and ethnohistoric interpretation relating to the Postclassic “Mexicanization” of Chichen Itza and the Yucatán peninsula (Tozzer 1957) derived largely from the native Maya histories known as the books of “Chilam Balams” (Roys 1933); these materials overshadowed any archaeologically established frameworks (A. Chase 1986; Lincoln 1986) and were used to establish the culture history. In fact, time and space systematics for the Terminal Classic in both the northern and southern lowlands were extremely varied and problematic (Ball 1979a; A. Chase and D. Chase 1985).

Archaeological work in northern Belize during the 1970s began to change the disjunctive perspective by squarely situating the Terminal Classic within viable, vibrant, and continuous contexts. At this time, in spite of substantial research in the country (especially by Pendergast [1969, 1970a, 1971] and Hammond [1975, 1983]), Belize was considered to be a “cultural backwater” for Maya studies (Hammond 1981). The ceramics from northern Belize did not match those known from the southern lowlands (Adams 1971; Culbert 1993a; Sabloff 1975a; R. Smith 1955), from the northern lowlands (Brainerd 1958; R. Smith 1971), or even from farther south in Belize (Thompson 1939; Gifford 1976), thus lending themselves to independent analytical sequencing (Pendergast 1970a). Even within the analytical constraints of a type-variety approach (A. Chase 1994), at minimum four distinct ceramic traditions were recognized in the relatively small area of northern Belize during the Late Classic (Pring 1976). Postclassic materials, however, were

widespread within this region (Gann 1900; Sidrys 1983). How then were these various Late Classic and Postclassic complexes integrated in time and space?

Eventually, the space-time systematics in northern Belize proved crucial for aligning diverse regional sequences found in the northern and southern lowlands (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982, 1988). There are a number of reasons for this. Northern Belize proved to be an area with a great variety of inter-regional contacts over time (D. Chase 1981, 1984, 1985a; D. Chase and A. Chase 1989; Hammond 1991; Pring 1976; Robertson 1983), especially during the Terminal Classic (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982). There was also an early concern with "contextual" analysis in the archaeology of northern Belize, especially as represented in the work of David Pendergast (1979, 1981a, 1982, 1990a) at Altun Ha and Lamanai. And, unlike central Petén, there were clear continuities in ceramic traditions from the Terminal Classic into the Postclassic—to the point where it sometimes can be difficult to distinguish time periods (Pendergast 1986a; Graham 1987b). Thus, there was no recognized disjunction in northern Belize. Instead, the archaeological focus shifted to looking at temporal continuities within discrete contexts.

Work at Nohmul, undertaken by us in 1978 and 1979 (and subsequently amplified [Hammond et al. 1985]), also was crucial in establishing a contextual, rather than analytical, typology for both ceramics (D. Chase 1982a) and other remains (D. Chase 1982b). Excavations at Nohmul Structures 9 and 20 provided both architectural and ceramic data that helped correlate northern and southern sequences. Primary refuse associated with Structure 20 permitted the linking of San Jose V materials (Thompson 1939) with a variety of northern lowland slate wares and also *molcajetes* (D. Chase 1982a). Architectural associations with these ceramic materials also helped place the bulk of "Mexican" Chichen Itza architecture into the Terminal Classic (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982)—at the same time strongly supporting what was called an "overlap" model for the northern lowlands in which the Puuc sites and Chichen Itza were seen as being coeval (Ball 1979a). At the time, the placement of Chichen Itza squarely into the Terminal Classic period was a relatively novel idea, but one that is now commonly accepted based on a reinterpretation of data largely deriving from Chichen Itza (Andrews 1990; Cobos, Chapter 22, this volume; Lincoln 1986; Schele and Freidel 1990). These spatio-temporal realignments also had implications for the Terminal Classic events and processes that engulfed the southern lowlands (A. Chase 1985b; D. Chase and A. Chase 1982; Kowalski 1989), but the full linkages still have not been worked out or fully explored.

CONTINUITIES IN CLASSIC TO POSTCLASSIC MATERIAL CULTURE

In the Maya area, Classic-period monumentality once was thought to represent a nearly total departure from the architecture of the preceding Preclassic period; however these ideas now have been almost completely overturned (Hammond

1985). Architectural complexes once thought to be hallmarks of the Early Classic period, such as E Groups, are now known to have their origins much earlier in the Middle Preclassic period (A. Chase 1985a; Laporte and Fialko 1995; Chase and Chase 1995; Hansen 1992). Likewise ceramics are no longer viewed as totally disjunctive between these two periods; both forms and slips crosscut any previously perceived boundary (Brady et al. 1998; Lincoln 1985). The Maya Preclassic to Classic ceramic traditions are linked. A similar situation can be suggested to exist for the transition between the Classic and the Postclassic periods. Not only is the “collapse” both variable and long-lived, but any changes that occurred in Maya material culture can now be seen as more complex and less disjunctive than a simple Classic-Postclassic dichotomy would suggest. Perhaps the best example of this may be seen in the one class of material culture thought to be among the most sensitive to change—ceramics. At Maya sites where occupation continues smoothly into the Postclassic period, it has proved nearly impossible for researchers to distinguish between Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic pottery, prompting a number of researchers to identify a large group of ceramics as “Terminal Classic-Early Postclassic” (Pendergast 1986a; Graham 1987b; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988).

Postclassic architecture often has been viewed as very distinctive from the preceding Classic period (Thompson 1954; Pollock et al. 1962). However, it is possible to view Postclassic construction techniques as continuations of trends that also were evident during the Maya Classic period. One hallmark of Postclassic architecture has been the occurrence of low “line-of-stone” buildings, constructions consisting primarily of foundations or base-walls for perishable edifices. Such buildings are observed initially only by flattened areas of soil and are sometimes included within so-called “vacant terrain” constructions (Bronson 1966; D. Chase 1990; Pyburn 1990). However, low constructions are not an innovation of the late Maya, but rather were made by the early Maya as well (Webster and Gonlin 1988; Willey et al. 1965). Line-of-stone buildings, in fact, characterize the majority of non-epicentral residences at many sites during the Classic period. For instance, at Caracol, Belize, fewer than 20 percent of buildings outside the site epicenter were vaulted and most of these are located in or near Caracol’s administrative causeway termini; the vast majority of residential group structures consist of “line-of-stone” and/or “base-wall” constructions (although many are on raised foundations). Likewise, other construction techniques frequently found at Postclassic sites, such as upright stone facings, also have antecedents earlier in the Late Classic at Caracol.

Postclassic architecture has been called “shabby” (Thompson 1954) in contrast to that of the preceding Classic period. Some scholars (Sabloff and Rathje 1975a) have suggested that “reduced-time” modifications in construction techniques were intentionally used as cost-saving measures. However, “shabby” construction techniques and “reduced-cost construction,” which included

the application of a thick slather of stucco over poorly constructed walls (for surface beautification), are not Postclassic inventions. At Caracol, Belize, Late Preclassic and Early Classic buildings are exceedingly well bedded, bonded, and constructed; intact examples of this early architecture still stand after nearly two thousand years. In contrast, Late Classic Caracol buildings are less solidly constructed and are rarely found intact; fully half of all Late Classic building walls have collapsed and fallen off the backs and sides of pyramids because of construction techniques that did not focus on long-term permanence. Thus, Postclassic architecture is simply the culmination of a long tradition of construction changes.

This is not to say that there are no distinctions between Classic and Postclassic material culture. There are differences. For example: Postclassic architecture is generally less massive than that found in the Classic period; small arrow points are far more common in the Postclassic than in earlier eras; and decorative techniques used on Postclassic pottery may include more modeling and post-fire painting. However, much of Postclassic material culture may be seen as comprising modifications and logical outgrowths of Classic-period precedents. And, in some cases, patterns previously thought to be Postclassic “innovations” can be shown to be in evidence much earlier in the Classic period.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF MAYA WARFARE

Proskouriakoff (1955) contrasted a militant Postclassic Maya era with a serene and peaceful earlier Classic age. Since her 1955 work, substantial research conducted on the Classic and Postclassic Maya suggests that any simple dichotomous distinctions in warfare activity between Classic and Postclassic Maya peoples are inappropriate. Hieroglyphic texts make reference to battles, wars, and the taking of captives and cities long before the end of the Classic period. The earliest “star-war,” dating to the sixth century, is known from Caracol, Belize, and foreshadows more than three centuries of frequent and hieroglyphically documented warfare (Webster 1977, 1993, 2000; Schele and Miller 1986: 209–210; A. Chase and D. Chase 1989, 1998a; D. Chase and A. Chase 2002; Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991). Archaeological evidence may be used to illustrate shifts in the technology and tactics of warfare, especially during the Late and Terminal Classic (A. Chase and D. Chase 1989; D. Chase and A. Chase 1992; Demarest 1993; Hassig 1992). Even later, Maya warfare during the Postclassic underwent yet another shift in tactics and weapons (Hassig 1992).

It is true, however, that by the very end of the Classic period, activities and relationships throughout the Maya lowlands appear to have been changing. This may be seen in the Terminal Classic iconography of both the northern and southern lowlands. Burning and sacking of towns is visible in murals at Chichen Itza, Mexico. There are also increased indications of human sacrifice. A platform just outside the ballcourt at this site depicts layers of human skulls, implying a similar-

ity to later Aztec *tzompantli*, or skull racks. Such a skull platform is also known from Classic-era Copán, and less elaborate versions surely existed at other sites. Art relating to war events in the northern lowlands—especially at Chichen Itza—portrayed a great many participants (Krochock 1988; Wren and Schmidt 1991), perhaps related to a suggested emergence of warrior societies or military orders at this time (Thompson 1943, 1970: 328). Southern lowland sites are similarly replete with increased and changed warfare imagery, which appears on both ceramics and monuments (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991). Throughout the lowlands a change in weaponry occurred toward the end of the Late Classic. Atlatl became the weapon of choice. Although previously known to the Maya (e.g., Early Classic Stela 31 at Tikal), the atlatl does not appear to have been heavily employed by the Maya until the Terminal Classic period, when it became a prominent weapon in both the iconography (Hassig 1992: 178) and the archaeological record (D. Chase and A. Chase 1992; Coe 1965a; Sabloff and Rathje 1975a: 76). Evidence of aggression is also visible in the construction of Terminal Classic fortifications in both the northern and southern lowlands (Dahlin 2000; Demarest 1993; Demarest et al. 1997; Webster 1977, 1979). Within these changing venues, we have suggested that the Terminal Classic Maya were increasingly concerned with regional territorial control and that some polities (such as Chichen Itza) may have been attempting to create large-scale empires (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982, 1992). Thus, the concern with warfare seen in Postclassic Maya society developed from long-standing Maya cultural traditions.

INDIVIDUALIZED WORSHIP AND THE BREAKDOWN OF ORGANIZED RELIGION

In contrast to the highly organized state religion often attributed to the Classic Maya (Thompson 1950, 1954, 1970), Postclassic Maya religion has been portrayed as having broken down into a system of privatized or individualized worship (Proskouriakoff 1955; Freidel and Sabloff 1984). Ethnohistoric support for a system of dispersed worship has been derived from accounts such as those of Bishop Landa, who describes the existence of numerous idols in Maya houses (Tozzer 1941: 110). Archaeological evidence that has been used to bolster this view of Postclassic religion are the broken pieces of incense burners found throughout Postclassic sites and the widespread distribution of caches and presumed household shrines in residential groups (Pollock et al. 1962, but cf. D. Chase 1992). Proskouriakoff's (1955, 1962) interpretation of these phenomena was that the Postclassic Maya had a plethora of gods, a marked departure from the Classic period, which she viewed as having a single dominant deity (following Thompson's 1954 and 1970 conceptions of Itzamna). In more recent literature, the widespread distribution of Postclassic incense burners has sometimes also been taken to suggest a decentralization of Maya religious practices within a still extant state system (Sabloff and Rathje 1975a; Andrews 1993: 59).

That these bodies of data indicate the breakdown and privatization of late Maya religion is not at all clear. The ethnohistoric evidence itself is not without ambiguity; Dennis Tedlock (1993: 145–146), for example, has pointed out that descriptions of numerous idols in early historic “confessions” may have been exaggerated in response to fear of torture. Postclassic cache and censer deposition patterns have also been viewed as reflecting organized rituals centered on the calendar year rather than as reflecting a fragmented society characterized by dispersed individualized worship (D. Chase 1985a, 1985b). Differences between Classic and Postclassic religion, however, do exist. Data from Postclassic Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, suggest that Maya religion was characterized by a trend toward broadening and popularizing the extant symbolism of the Classic period, something particularly evident in Postclassic caches (D. Chase 1988; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). From our perspective, Postclassic Maya religion was broad-based and had a large constituency. Nearly identical offerings were made at distant sites, as can be seen in cached deposits at Mayapán in Yucatán and Santa Rita Corozal in northern Belize (D. Chase 1986); intriguingly, both sites also are thought to have been the governing seats of distinctive regional political units. To some extent these Postclassic cache similarities may be viewed as comparable to the similarities in Classic-period caches found at separate Classic-period sites like Tikal and Piedras Negras in Guatemala (Coe 1959). But, there are significant differences. Although residential caches are found in some Classic sites, they usually comprise different items than those found in caches associated with Classic-era nonresidential monumental architecture (for example, compare Culbert 1993a with Coe 1990 and Becker 1999). Similar Postclassic caches can be found both in central locations and throughout residential units.

Regardless of whether or not the characterization of dispersed ritual reflects Late Postclassic society, the basic archaeological patterns upon which these interpretations are made—specifically the widespread distribution of caches, incense burners, and shrines—are found not only in the Postclassic period, but are also common among certain Classic-period Maya sites. Late Classic residential-group caches are ubiquitous at Caracol and form a very distinctive pattern. Caches with modeled and appliqued faces and small lip-to-lip bowls containing human finger bones are found in the eastern structure in the majority of groups that have been tested (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Censerware is found throughout the Late Classic settlement and is not restricted to the Caracol site epicenter (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996d). Specialized shrines also occur in many Classic-era residential groups at Caracol and elsewhere (Becker 1982; Leventhal 1983, Tourtellot 1983: 47; A. Chase and D. Chase 1994b). Thus, practices presumed to be uniquely Postclassic actually have antecedents much farther back in the Classic period. And, continuity, rather than disjunction, may be found between the Classic and Postclassic patterns. Indeed, as indi-

cated above, if a shift from centralized to dispersed ritual practices may be discerned in the archaeological record, it occurred prior to A.D. 600 at sites like Caracol.

TRADE, EXTERNAL TIES, AND UPWARD MOBILITY

It has been suggested that the Postclassic Maya may have been “pragmatic mercantilists” (Sabloff and Rathje 1975a: 79) with an ascending merchant class who perfected masonry false-fronts on buildings, employed mass-production methods in pottery production, and conducted extensive long-distance trade. The Late Postclassic Maya also have been projected as being more cosmopolitan in their external ties; this is particularly visible in their somewhat more uniform art styles (Robertson 1970). Evidence for an extremely wide distribution of similar or identical material remains—including ceramics (Plumbate: Shepard 1948), lithics (tanged points: Rovner 1975), art (Mixteca-Puebla: Nicholson 1960), and architectural styles (plaza plans: Rice 1986; Rice and Rice 1985; Tourtellot, Sabloff, and Carmean 1992)—in and following the Terminal Classic, ethnohistoric descriptions of traders (Roys 1957; Sabloff 1977), and comparisons to the dendritic Aztec economic system (Hassig 1985; Santley 1994) have all led to suggestions that both upward mobility and a cosmopolitan outlook were made possible among the Postclassic Maya by an increased emphasis on trade.

Cozumel may have had a focus on trade that was more pronounced than anything that existed in the Classic period (Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Sabloff and Rathje 1975a, 1975b). Yet it is clear that the Maya had a long history of involvement in trade. Studies indicate that even the Preclassic Maya were active traders (Cobos 1994; Hammond 1976; Sidrys 1976). Stackable vessels and standardized vessel forms, thought to be indicative of mass production during the Postclassic era (Sabloff and Rathje 1975a), also can be considered as a hallmark of the Late Preclassic (labial flanged bowls) and Late Classic (ring-based plates) Maya lowlands. Throughout the lowlands during the Early Classic period, contact was maintained and trade goods obtained from distant areas such as the Guatemalan and Mexican highlands (Ball 1974a, 1983b; Coe 1967; Pendergast 1970b). Thus, the Postclassic era is not the only Maya time-span that may have focused on trade and mass production.

Arguments about trade and economics are integral to considerations of Mesoamerican social complexity. Sanders (1992: 291) has noted that “only within a large mercantile class and its related economic elements, the *tlameme* and elite craft specialists who processed the raw products brought by the merchants, could a significant, well-defined middle class emerge in setting as energetically and technologically limited as Prehispanic Mesoamerica.” Research at large Maya sites like Caracol (A. Chase 1992; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a, 1996c; D. Chase and A. Chase 1994), Dzibilchaltun (Kurjack 1974; Andrews IV and Andrews V 1980), and Tikal (Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992) have produced archaeological data

suggesting that such a level of institutional complexity was, in fact, met during the Late Classic era.

Various archaeological data indicate the growth of a middle social level beginning minimally in the early part of the Late Classic period. Investigations at Caracol, Belize, indicate that most residential groups were engaged in the manufacture of items for trade. These same data demonstrate that material well-being and upward mobility were widespread during the Late Classic period (A. Chase 1992; Chase and Chase 1996b). Tombs, polychrome pottery, marine shell, jadeite, and other ritual items were found throughout the excavations at Caracol (D. Chase 1988; A. and D. Chase 1994b, 1996d; D. Chase and A. Chase 1996). Dental inlays, sometimes thought to be indicative of status (Krecji and Culbert 1995), are also relatively widespread (D. Chase 1994: 131–132). Even hieroglyphic texts—at least the portable ones—were apparently shared by non-elite individuals; in fact, portable artifacts with hieroglyphic texts have been found largely in non-elite contexts at Caracol. The widespread distribution of all these items is indicative of a highly integrated economic system at Caracol.

Sabloff and Rathje (1975b: 19–20) argued that effective internal communication combined with a homogenized artifactual assemblage and a centralized bureaucracy characterized Cozumel Island as a trading center during the Postclassic era. In actuality, what they defined is consistent with an administered economic system (e.g., C. Smith 1974, 1976b) where distribution is controlled by a central elite or bureaucracy. It is also consistent with archaeological data from Caracol that have been used to argue for an administered economic system (A. Chase 1998). Caracol's radiating causeways not only served as passage routes for the site's population, but also, in conjunction with the causeway termini, as a framework for distributing goods throughout the city (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996a, 1996c). Thus, the emergence of internally complex economic institutions and of a middle socioeconomic level, once argued to mark only Postclassic society, as typified by the Aztec (Sanders 1992), appears to have occurred among the Late Classic Maya and is another indication of cultural continuity between the Classic and Postclassic periods. Regardless of whether the discussion revolves around trade, mass production, status levels, economic systems, or upward mobility, antecedents to Late Postclassic Maya patterns may be discerned in the earlier Classic period.

LINKING THE CLASSIC AND POSTCLASSIC

Viewing the Terminal Classic-period Maya from multiple perspectives and with a concern for hermeneutics helps make understandable heretofore undiscernible or controversial areas of Maya culture. Moreover, such analyses help make the Postclassic Maya appear substantially less unique and the “collapse” even less uniform.

The Postclassic Maya maintained some aspects of Classicism and modified others. The texts on Classic stelae and altars recorded predominantly political

activity, neglecting other aspects of culture and history. Yet the extant Postclassic Maya codices indicate that Classic-era writing must have been used to record a much wider range of more practical information. None of the known Maya codices bear close resemblance to Classic monuments, as none record dynastic history. However (and contrary to popular belief), Long Count notation continued long after the ninth century in the lowlands (Tedlock 1992: 247–248). The very striking examples of Postclassic art—innovative work that stressed different media than those generally favored in earlier eras—indicate that a vibrant culture still existed (D. Chase 1981; Pendergast 1986a). Postclassic Maya religion continued to have both pan-Maya symbolism and household distribution of ritual items (seen in the Classic period). Widespread Postclassic caching practices (D. and A. Chase 1998) can be seen as an attempt to involve more people in the detailed aspects of religious activity and have Late Classic precursors. In general, trends begun in the Late Classic period continued with greater emphasis in the Postclassic; mass-production techniques were used (especially with regard to ceramics) and internally complex economic institutions were established. Upward mobility was also apparently an option in the Classic era and is not restricted solely to the Postclassic.

All this is not to deny that discontinuities existed between the Classic and Postclassic eras. Populations moved away from many of the old cities to areas where important resources—especially water—were more readily available. Residential groups became less visible and were seemingly not as evenly dispersed over the landscape as were their Classic counterparts; rather, Postclassic house groups were densely “clustered” into what appear to be numerous small towns. Architectural constructions also involved less intensive building techniques in combination with exterior adornment of building facades in more perishable plaster and paint, building modes (with origins much earlier in the Classic period) that were certainly not inappropriate for an established society (see also Andrews 1993: 58–59).

Situating Terminal Classic events and activities within a continuous, rather than disjunctive, frame of reference sheds additional light on the Classic to Postclassic transition. Information pertaining to eighth- and ninth-century events in the Maya lowlands is suggestive of factors that were important to the Maya of the Terminal Classic. Many sites do show evidence of both increased warfare and alliances (A. Chase 1985b; D. and A. Chase 1992). Stone monuments portray warriors, exhibit captives, and tell of battles as well as of alliances (Grube 1994a). Like the late monuments, molded-carved pottery also shows both bound captives and scenes of alliance. Terminal Classic murals depict warriors and battles. Some lowland sites show evidence of fortification. Although there may have been rapid abandonment of the epicentral locations at some sites, there is also increasing evidence for continued occupation of certain outlying areas. Terminal Classic trade routes survived into the Postclassic and so apparently did many elite. We believe that there were significant political changes in Maya society at the end of

the Classic period, but that these alterations merely reinforced cultural variations and traditions put into place centuries earlier.

Was the transition from the Classic to Postclassic really a devolution? Does it represent the “fall” or “collapse” of a formerly great civilization? We think not. More than any other point in Maya prehistory, the Classic to Postclassic transition requires hermeneutic considerations to illuminate understanding of this transformation. What is seen in Postclassic society is the continued adaptation of the Maya to a shifting reality (e.g., Rathje 1975). This adaptation generally followed traditionally established Maya patterns, but with modifications conditioned by social and political events that link the Classic and Postclassic periods. Importantly, many of the culture changes generally associated solely with the Postclassic in past literature and interpretive frames (summarized in Chase and Rice 1985)—the appearance of a middle status level, privatization of worship, pragmatic mercantilism, and expansive warfare—had their roots squarely in the preceding Classic period. Thus, the basic developmental trends toward Postclassic lifeways were already in place well prior to the Terminal Classic. The Postclassic Maya cultural transition was not solely the result of a specific, or a series of specific, disjunctive Terminal Classic events, whether cast in terms of warfare, climate change, or environmental degradation. Postclassic Maya and their cultures are not disjunctive with their Classic ancestors; they are the product of a long tradition of transformations, including those taking place during the minimally two-hundred-odd years of what was once termed the Maya “collapse.”

NOTES

1. The utility of these features in characterizing even the Classic-period Maya is a point that can certainly be debated. Use of trait-lists obscures the variability in culture during all time horizons. Finely carved monuments do not occur at all Maya sites; they are conspicuously absent, for example, at the majority of Classic-period sites in northern Belize. Tall pyramids are now known to exist during the Preclassic period not only at El Mirador, but also at sites such as Caracol, where they are generally obscured by later construction activities. And, like Postclassic house pads (D. Chase 1990), much Classic-period occupation occurs in relatively low-lying residential constructions. Similar to the Postclassic, the absence of polychrome pottery in many Early Classic contexts has, in the past, led researchers to assume incorrectly that there was little or no occupation during this time (see A. and D. Chase 1995; Lincoln 1985). While tombs are thought to characterize Classic Maya society, they also occur in Postclassic contexts at Mayapán (Pollock et al. 1962) and Lamanai (Pendergast 1981a). Finally, Classic Maya centers also varied substantially in size from huge, densely populated cities to much smaller hamlets and centers.

2. Apparent cessation of monument erection is also not limited to the “collapse” but is found at other times in Maya prehistory. Some of these occasions are attributed to ancient monument destruction (such as at Tikal, presumably by Caracol [A. Chase 1991] or at Naranjo, presumably as a result of warfare [Houston 1991]) associated with political turbulence. In other situations a lack of stone monuments may be an inten-

tional act by an otherwise successful polity; for instance, we believe Caracol's Late Classic non-use of stone monuments must have been politically expedient (A. and D. Chase 1996c). In still other situations, the stone monument record may have been purposefully replaced with stucco building decoration, as at Copán (A. Chase 1985b).

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